Indiana University Press

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Source: *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Winter, 1994), pp. 33-49
Published by: Indiana University Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3819866
Accessed: 28-10-2015 02:48 UTC

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A Bored Spinster with a Locked Diary: The Politics of Hysteria in In the Heart of the Country

Chiara Briganti

> The modern novel should be largely a work of reference.... A wealth of references to existing works would acquaint the reader instantaneously with the nature of each character, would obviate tiresome explanations and would effectively preclude mountebanks, upstarts, thimbleriggers, and persons of inferior education from an understanding of contemporary literature. Conclusion of explanation.
>
> That is all my bum, said Brinsley.
>
> (Flann O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds* 33)

And yet,[1] in terms of the critical debate in the last two decades and the direction toward which contemporary fiction has been moving, Brinsley may be wrong. The use of *pastiche* and the techniques of *collage*, the dialogue with literary precursors for parodic purposes and to dispel the dichotomy between art and reality, have become the signature of contemporary narrative discourse. In post-modern narratives, recycling is the word. In spite of

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claims that this practice is the sign of the sterility of modern culture, of its failure to create new forms, the intertextual nature of re-writings does not detract from their literary autonomy and often enables them to comment on and to lend new meaning to their models while deconstructing their underlying ideology. In this essay I want to focus on J. M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), a novel in which the dialogue with literary precursors constitutes a complex and insistent subtext. The literary archives of the past are raided for the fictional possibilities they contain and at the same time help to expose the paternalistic colonizing impulse that underlies narrative realism. The narrative, in fact, stretches the boundaries of realism, on the one hand, by taking the stuff for its story from literature, and, on the other, by creating a narrator who is able to find evidence of her own existence only in her own writing. While Coetzee's political investment in the deconstruction of realism has been duly noted,[2] the way in which gender contributes to it has been largely ignored. And yet one of the most fertile aspects of this novel and of its perusal of the literary past is the way in which the voice of the female narrator and the insistence on her "daughterhood," by allowing for a "return of the repressed," contributes to such deconstruction. The inscription of the female subject demystifies authorial identity by questioning the legitimacy of the father/author as locus of authority and begetter of texts and makes visible that which, as Teresa De Lauretis has said in another context, was "previously invisible, untold, unspoken" (11). New, unimagined possibilities emerge; as Magda, the narrator of *In the Heart of the Country*, claims, "What will happen to me has not yet happened" (43).

> If the desire of literary criticism is to tell every truth, to unveil whatever is veiled, to expose every secret to sight, why does it not tell its own secrets? Or does it claim to have none?
>
> (J. M. Coetzee, "Truth in Autobiography")

While other novels by Coetzee, in particular *Foe*, have been at the center of much intelligent debate, *In the Heart of the Country* has suffered until recently both from neglect and careless dismissal. Josephine Dodd, one of the few critics who, before Teresa Dovey and David Attwell, has paid attention to this novel, has persuasively argued that the reviews of *In the Heart of the Country* are informed by a set of ideological and textual assumptions that have led to a total re-interpretation of "Magda's story, Magda's life, Magda's psychology, Magda's text....for the sake of consumption" (4). This has resulted in the canceling out of the heroine, a "spinsterish cypher," in the words of Stephen Watson (whose otherwise astute criticism founders vis-à-vis Magda), and in the marginalization of the novel itself. For most of her critics, Magda is simply mad, and she is mad because she is a spinster. It has made no difference to them that Magda herself has anticipated this interpretation: "Yet how galling, after meditations that would do credit to a thinker, to find myself worked into the trap of conceding that if only I had a good man to sleep at my side....all would be well" (41). And of course the

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discontinuities in the narrative and the blurring between factual and imaginary reality have often been regarded as an irritating sign of Magda's insanity.[3] Since this novel is explicitly engaged in a dialogue with psychoanalytic discourse—an important subtext of Magda's narrative is Freud's *Studies on Hysteria*—it is somehow surprising that one of the major tenets of psychoanalysis, the inextricability of fantasy and reality, should have been completely overlooked by critics who in other respects show that they have learnt the lesson of psychoanalysis. For indeed, the psychoanalytic lesson is evident in their approach, which brings these critics to dismiss this novel as the muddled ravings of a hysterical spinster, thus paralleling Freud's repudiation of the seduction theory—with its indictment of the father—in favor of the theory that sees seduction as mere fantasy. With Freud they also share the unease vis-à-vis unmarried females that led the father of psychoanalysis to perpetuate "the belief in marriage as a standard for mental health" (Katz 297).[4] As Susan Katz has persuasively argued, Freud was willing to allow the case histories of his male patients the open-ended form of modernist and post-modernist narratives while, in the case of his female patients, he was only too eager to stick to "conventionally 'Victorian' narratives" (300) in which closure coincides with marriage.

Josephine Dodd has observed that Magda's perceptions of herself are shaped by her having "absorbed the lessons of literature" and suggests that she may be "framed by, circumscribed by, a literary and psychoanalytic discourse which is ill-suited to her specific spatio-temporal experience" (158). This frame, once it is aptly manipulated, is instrumental in bringing about Magda's dismissal as the subject of her text. As Dodd states, "Magda is scripted by our dominant psychoanalytic discourse to identify her as wanting to be seduced by her father" (159). But, I would add, her very awareness that she will be framed ("Forces within me belonging to the psychology I abhor will take possession of me," 70) should alert us to the necessity of taking into full account her dialogue with this script and the way in which she reshapes it. Ignoring her contribution would mean that we are reading another "kind of story, the weave of reminiscence in the dozing space of the mind," which, as Magda well knows, "can never be mine" (43):

> From the beginning, nothing has been more alien, more repugnant, and hostile to woman than truth—her great art is the lie. (Nietzsche, "Our Virtues" par. 232)

In *In the Heart of the Country*, J. M. Coetzee attempts a radical deconstruction of the subject. Identity is at best provisional in Magda's case, as she assumes a self only to call it into question, almost in an attempt to forestall the critics' efforts to attach predictable sexual meanings to her story, to explain her away in spite of her desire to remain "inexplicable" (5)—but not "non-existent." On the one hand, Magda is aware of the arbitrariness of all interpretive constructs; on the other hand, she is also conscious that her repeated attempts to defy interpretation might ultimately cancel her. The excessive, redundant quality of her self-descriptions, by stressing the difficulty of defining her, renders her invisible, always on the verge of being lost

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in "the babble of words within me that fabricate and refabricate me as something else, something else" (48-49). Her invisibility allows her to traverse the narrative regardless of sex, age, and class and to refuse to endorse the father's vision. She becomes, in fact, "the blind spot" of the novel (perhaps Irigaray's "Blind Spot of An Old Dream of Symmetry"?), "hurtling with both eyes open into the maw of the future, my password 'And then'" (43). However, these self-representations also show Magda as engaged in a masquerade that enables her to parody the male gaze and those images that are seen culturally through men's eyes, and also show her remarkable capacity for self-regeneration. Sterile and slothful, she is a skinny and self-conscious version of Olive Schreiner's Tant' Sannie, or, at times, a Lyndall full of yearning; she is the heroine who fights migraines behind closed shutters, a "black bored spinster with a locked diary," a "jagged" or "miserable black virgin," "a maiden lady weak in the head." These roles climax in the impersonation of the old crone, the character in the story that she imagines a little boy telling himself after encountering her. A switch to the third-person pronoun announces yet another impersonation, while also emphasizing the estrangement that comes from perceiving oneself through male eyes: "The Angel, that is how she is sometimes known, the Angel in Black who comes to save the children of the brown folk from their croups and fevers" (5), a conflation of the dead mother and of the Angel in the House that haunts Victorian literature. And later on she yearns to be "a plain placid empty-headed heiress anxious not to be left on the shelf" (22). As a "ghost or a vapour floating at the intersection of a certain latitude and a certain longitude" (17), she can traverse centuries and narratives and encounter innkeepers, postillions, highwaymen, "if that is the century I am in" (63), a silver-haired gentleman, a young man who can equally turn out to be her long-lost brother or her seducer (64); or she can appear as a novel Miss Havisham (or Emily Dickinson, since she refers to herself as "a poetess of interiority" (35), "dressed for preference in white" (131). If her allusions to the scenario of hysteria may lead us to view her as a disturbed woman subject to delusions and a powerless victim, her capacity for self-transformation points back to what Nina Auerbach has called "the true theme of *Studies on Hysteria*—"woman's capacity for amazing and empowering self-transformations" (294).

Not only does Magda inhabit the stories she invents, or, as she would say, the stories she is destined to inhabit, but she also makes excursions into other scripts. Her (imaginary?) visit to the schoolhouse, for instance, resonates with echoes of Stephen Dedalus's visit to his father's college. There Stephen, in place of his father's initials, finds the word "foetus" carved in one of the desks. While for Stephen this word triggers a private storm of awakening sexuality and guilt, it also designates the unborn child with whom Stephen identifies, for he, too, is unborn, and in order to be ushered into life he will need to enact a family romance in which Daedalus, the mythical Greek artificer, will replace the ineffectual Irish father. Here, Magda wonders, "If I hauled those benches into the light would I find...his initials hacked into the wood with a penknife?" (46). Unlike Stephen, she

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cannot rely on the gradual disappearance of the father that is granted by the very principle of patrilineage, and on the sustenance of a well-suited mythological frame. So, while Stephen explores the potential of inheritance, Magda's search only triggers thoughts of incest ("What did he learn from Hansel and Gretl about fathers who lead their daughters into dark forests?"), which, by sending her back to stumble against the frame of psychoanalytic discourse that threatens to explain her away, exposes her own personal and cultural disinheritance.

While Stephen can imagine himself as the successful modernist heir of the mythical artificer, Magda, trapped in textuality, "a prisoner not of the lonely farmhouse and the stone desert but of my stone monologue" (27), is, at least ostensibly, a perfect example of the decentered subject of post-modern texts. The assumption of different roles, while granting her a sort of invisibility, suggests the self-referential, hyperliterary nature of the universe in which she acts, a universe in which everything has already been said, thus strengthening the tension between imagination and reality and the presence of a strong self-referential element which is typical of post-modernism. However, as Teresa De Lauretis has noticed, "[t]he stakes, for women, are rooted in the body—which is not to say that the body escapes representation, but quite the opposite. The body is continually and inevitably caught up in representation" (12). And Magda's oscillations between emphasizing the linguistic status of the subject, her fall into textuality, as it were, and her insistence on the body, on her own physicality, on even exhibitionistic self-display, exemplifies the issues that confront contemporary feminism: in one respect, the acceptance of the post-modern view of the decentered self, and, in another, the necessity to recuperate the value of experience by pointing to a specifically, albeit fragmentary and unstable, feminine identity,[5] thus problematizing the relationship between post-modernism and female subjectivity.[6] Furthermore, by the end of the novel her father's "eyes are sightless" (137) (Magda may very well be aware of Freud's notion of blindness as a symbol for castration), while by filling her narrative with self-representations she has indeed become the *koré*, in Greek both the daughter and the pupil of the eye. She is able to engage in "re-vision," "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (Rich 35). This effort combines the impulse of post-modernism with Elaine Showalter's definition of "feminist critique"—a mode of interpretation that concentrates "on exposing the mysogyny of male literary practice" (5). By choosing her roles from the stock-characters of Victorian romance and exposing their vulnerability to psychoanalytic interpretation, Magda uncovers the assumptions that underlie not only such literature but also psychoanalysis as a discourse operating within the boundaries of Victorian constructions of femininity. In other words, in Derridean fashion, she subverts them precisely by inhabiting them and risking to falling prey to them.

Because of the fluidity that Magda seeks in her continuous assumption of different roles, it is practically impossible to define the events of the novel at the level of plot. Magda is the declared voice not only of the novel, the

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filter through which events must pass in order to become known to us, but of the writer who constantly revises her work, a figure of doubt and uncertainty who is driven by the modern politics of knowledge to develop strategies for placing herself beyond criticism. She begins her story with the imagined arrival of her father with his new bride. Thus, she chooses for a beginning the moment of her displacement, the moment in which she is forced to renounce her place in the household, a place that is ambiguous to start with. After giving a fairly detailed account of this imagined arrival, she quickly revises it, and finally admits that she wasn't watching. She was behind closed shutters, impersonating the sickly heroine of many Victorian texts. When she reminisces about her mother, she casts herself into the role of the orphan gazing lovingly at the mother's portrait and conjures up a suitably sepia-colored portrait—"From one of the farthest oubliettes of memory I extract a faint grey image, the image of a faint grey frail gentle loving mother"—describing it in a language that would be suspect even if it were not followed by "one such as any girl in my position would be likely to make up for herself" (2). Consistent with the conventional iconography of gender, her mother is "the soft, the fair" (37). Contrasted with the father, "the hard, the dark," "a tower with eyes" (41), she is reduced to being only the Other term of the dyad, only the father's opposite. Magda's insistence on the fictional status of the mother, who survives only as a remote literary ideal, and on the resulting impossibility of re-finding her own origins ("I grope around inside my head for the mouth of the tunnel...but the tunnel is not there," 37), is made obvious by her juxtaposition of the greyness of the portrait with the greyness beneath and by the uninterrupted sequel of conventional adjectives. In fact, a few pages later, when she speaks about the mirror "inherited by my long-lost mother, whom one day I shall find" (21), the sepia portrait turns out to be only "a grey blur...traced out by my eye along the wall" (21). That the mirror itself, with its promise of illusory images of wholeness, is gone may be a sign of Magda's desire to escape her assigned place within the genealogy of "frail gentle loving" women perpetuated in the literature that she has mastered. Determined to construct a narrative of her own desire, she erases this image of gentleness and beauty and, making a spectacle of herself—an act that defies what Nancy K. Miller has called the mother's "injunction against exposure" (23), replaces it with obsessively frequent descriptions of herself as a scrawny, rickety scarecrow of a woman.

Magda's citational practice clearly indicates that she has not only learnt the lessons of literature but of theory as well, as she claims that "[w]ords are coin. Words alienate" (26). Reflecting her mistrust of language ("I have no words left to exchange whose value I trust," 97), her narrative is tentative, made up of entries that often begin with "perhaps," followed by identical sentences, which then proceed to give a different account of the same events. "I make it all up in order that it shall make me up" (73), she admits. So the stories thicken around her, constructing a claustrophobic

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universe that stifles her, a universe from which the embellishments of civilization have disappeared and "brother and sister, wife and daughter and concubine prowl and snarl...or stalk each other through the dim passages of the ancestral home" (70). For, she wonders, "What other tale is there for me? Marriage to the neighbor's second son?" (5). She can't stop, because it is through her narrative impulse that she comes into existence. Should she stop, she "would die back into the silence" she came from (59) and her world would fall apart. Thus, she must continue to create herself in words, always tentatively, beginning each new story with "if." Like Dora, who "refused to be a character in the story that Freud was composing for her and wanted to finish it for herself" (Marcus 88), she must discard the stories she inhabits like the shells of a dead creature, migrating from an empty shell to another like the hermit crab to which she compares herself.

Dora met Freud's "interpretative assaults as she did Herr K.'s: with a recurrent 'no'" (Auerbach 295); Magda's continuous migrations are her way of saying "no" to the interpretative assaults of her critics and of exposing their cultural assumptions about femininity and female desire. One of her most effective strategies from the very beginning is to blur the boundaries between imagination and "reality." So after leading the reader to believe that she has murdered her father and her stepmother, she undoes (unsays) the murder of both:

> For he does not die so easily after all...the old days are not gone after all. He has not brought home a new wife. I am still his daughter, though it would be well, I can see, to keep out of his way while he ruminates a failure which I, innocent of the ways of courtship, kept all my life in the economic dark, will fail to understand. (17)

She ceases to speak about the newlyweds and tells us that it is Hendrik, the black servant, who has brought home a new wife. Now Magda's murderous fantasies give place first to another melodrama of sexual politics, the account of her father's affair with Hendrik's wife Anna, and then to Magda's "really" attempted murder and to a strange *ménage à trois* including Hendrik, Anna, and Magda herself, with the father reduced to being a helpless invalid. It is true that the entry in which she relates the arrival of Hendrik and Anna (17) repeats almost verbatim the first entry, where she told of the imagined arrival of her father and his bride, thus undermining its own validity. And it is true that the father is not dead, but it is also true that Magda has replaced him with the black servant and that by the end of the novel the father is "sightless." Even though Magda suspects that "for some days after my death he will still lie here breathing" (137), he has been maimed, while she has been able to utter "[her] life in [her] own voice throughout" and has "chosen at every moment [her] own destiny" (139). Her attempt to recover the experiential, her usurpation of the male role in the wounding of the father, and the consequent parodic re-reading of the Oedipal model result in a radical revision of the scenario of hysteria as constructed by the literary and psychoanalytic discourse that frames her. By flouting the very principle that governs the structure of patrilineage in the taking of the father's place

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by the son, she turns herself into an agent instead of being an instrument of culture.[7]

Stephen Watson has wondered "why Magda gives (among many others) what is so obviously a Freudian explanation for her predicament." And, in particular, he has wondered why she has to "refer to 'the childhood rape' as if she were some glib psychology undergraduate" (373). However, as I will demonstrate, Magda's knowledge of psychoanalysis goes well beyond the syllabus of some "Introduction to Psychology" course. On the one hand, she is, as I observed earlier, scripted by a psychoanalytic discourse. On the other hand, she is also committed to expose the assumptions that governed the genesis of psychoanalysis. When her father takes Hendrik's wife as his mistress, Magda, haunted by voices and sounds, is "the bitter child straining her ears behind the door at the far end of the house" (52). And, eventually, she will construct her version of the primal scene, her spying on them, which climaxes in her imagined murder of the father: "The door of my father's room is locked against me but the window is open, as ever. I have had enough, tonight, of listening to the sounds that other people make" (60). She knows that what follows the primal scene is the talking cure: "There was a time when I imagined that if I talked long enough it would be revealed to me what it means to be an angry spinster" (4). Her words, however, imply that she also knows that the cure may fail, not only because words alienate, but also because, as she adds with a Blakean twist, "The frenzy of desire in the medium of words yields the mania of catalogue" (26). But her knowledge does not stop here. For instance, her references to the scheme of interpretation that threatens her story suggest her awareness of the uncertainty of the place of the critic in the dynamics of literary interpretation and of the analyst in the psychoanalytic dialogue, and of the importance of the relationship between teller and listener in the production of meaning. She knows that meaning will be thrust on her with her own complicity and that once she is cast in the role of hysterical daughter, she will be fair game for the analyst's verbal seduction. (Didn't Freud admit in his autobiography that he may have forced these "fantasies" on his hysterical patients?) She knows that she can be seduced into framing herself as a woman who suffers from reminiscences. But she also knows that she can exploit the seductive nature of narration to revise the scenario that she is destined to inhabit.

As Claire Kahane has noticed, "the talking cure undermines the image of woman as ear listening to male speech.... The talking cure evokes the classic image of seduction, the lips whispering into an ear, yet it also raises the question of who is seducing whom" ("Seduction" 140). Magda makes her reader her listener and turns him/her into the object of her verbal seduction. By having her reader listen to her repressed speech, she exposes the vulnerable status of the father and taps the unconscious of psychoanalysis. The strategies that she adopts to affirm herself as a presence by negotiating her relationship with the father, the recurring references to a possibly incestuous relation with the father and to hysteria involve both appropriation and rejection of her master-narrative. They demand that we, as her

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readers/listeners, allow for a return of the repressed of psychoanalysis and recall its wavering between seduction theory and sexual fantasy, and perhaps also pay attention to the fact that this wavering parallels the dual view of colonization as violation and as benign, paternal appropriation. They demand that we are never comfortable with simply seeing Magda as a repressed spinster who spins erotic fantasies about her father or as a violated daughter. By choosing the plural pronoun—"Then we have retired to sleep, to dream allegories of baulked desire such as we are blessedly unfitted to interpret" (3)—she identifies herself with Freud's hysterical patients and seems to re-claim hysteria as "the disease of women in patriarchal culture"[8] and to embrace her masterplot. But this "we" is also the subject of the following entry where she invites us to see her as a seduced daughter, "Wooed when we were little by our masterful fathers, we are bitter vestals, spoiled for life. The childhood rape: someone should study the kernel of truth in this fancy" (3). If she speaks of her "dark desires" (23), she also describes herself as "the grim widow-daughter of the dark father" (3) and tells us that "there is incest in the line." Her father enters her dreams, she admits, but these dreams "are not my creatures nor are they his: they are ours together" (34). And later on she adds, "There is a scheme of interpretation.... But who is to say what a dream about my father is?" (73). Always highly self-conscious, she evokes hysteria explicitly: "I blush for my own thin smell of an unused woman, sharp with hysteria, like onions, like urine" (86)[9]; and the story she chooses to inhabit for most of her narrative is the story of the hysterical daughter, one of those dutiful daughters who become deranged after years spent in tending their fathers. Her narrative, like Freud's case histories, simultaneously looks forward to modern fiction and backward to the Victorian literary tradition. Indeed, had she lived in Vienna at the turn of the century, when psychoanalysis was going through the throes of birth, she might have been among those young women who contributed the clinical data that were to prove so useful to Dr. Freud. Through her migraines, her sepia portraits, she too claims to be, like Emmy Von N., "a woman of the past century," though the scenario for her story is not nineteenth-century Vienna but "the middle of nowhere." But, as I mentioned earlier, Magda is careful about not letting herself fall into the trap of interpretation. Her reminiscences surface not only from her personal past but are the debris of the past of all "ruined" (63) daughters, daughters always in search of a story to inhabit, struggling against schemes of interpretation, subject to the verbal seduction of the analyst. Her linguistic choices strongly suggest a high degree of self-consciousness in her participation in the scenario of hysteria: "I feed my father his broth and weak tea. Then I press my lips to his forehead and fold him away for the night" (137), she says, echoing the accounts of those daughters who devoted their life to the care of an invalid parent.

The discontinuities of her narrative reflect not only the nature of woman's process of "writing the self,"[10] but also, more specifically, her struggle not to give in to aphasia—the destiny that attends the hysterical daughters—and to continue to talk, even though it is only a "father-tongue" (97)

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that is available to her. As Dodd points out, "The apparent unsupplantability of male discourse is something of which Magda is aware" (159). Even in her fantasy of her father's death, the father continues to speak. She describes herself "waiting for my father's eyebrows to coalesce, then the black pools beneath them. Then the cavern of the mouth from which echoes and echoes his eternal NO" (16). Her difficulty with language is the difficulty of recognizing the "NO" of the father and obeying his law: "The lips...are tired of all the articulating they have had to do since they were babies, since it was revealed to them that there was a law, that they could no longer simply part themselves to make way for the long *aaaa* which has, if truth be told, always been enough for them, enough of an expression of whatever this is that needs to be expressed" (84). She knows that her "lost world is a world of men, of cold nights, woodfire, gleaming eyes, and a long tale of dead heroes in a language I have not unlearned" (7). The novel itself is a process of unlearning this paternal language that has crystallized into a series of uncongenial plots, a process that parallels Magda's re-vision of her master-narrative. These plots unfold like a hall of mirrors in which she encounters herself already cast as a fictional character and realizes her own entrapment: "In the cluster of my room I am the mad hag I am destined to be" (8). She must find words "that are not words such as men use to men.... I create myself in the words that create me" (8). Those words she finds in "my own bowels" and in the heart of the country. Both her (imagined?) wounding of the father and her writing of messages are ways of affirming agency while at the same time accepting the provisionality and positionality of identity.

Magda's narrative posits itself as a diary of sorts (thus assuming the ambiguous status of diary, with its claims to truth and authenticity and its rejection of closure), but does not authorize us to regard it as a diary (the only diary she mentions is a locked one, the only writing she does is with stones). While the inclusion of the scene of writing in the text has become one of the most common *topoi* of the postmodern novel, here it is insistently marginalized, relegated to a locked diary or to messages made up of stones. Toward the end of the novel, Magda tells us that she hears voices coming from the "flying machines" overhead. These messages address the issue of colonization in their references to slaves and masters but also accuse her of turning her life into fiction, not in rebellion against true oppression, "but in reaction against the tedium of serving my father" (128). In other words, like the novel's critics, the sky-gods ignore her attempt to be more than the protagonist of a political allegory[11] and reduce the specificity of her experience to a case of hysteria. In an effort to respond, she forms gigantic messages made of painted stones, thereby "encoding" for us the narratorial merging of arid country, sterile spinster, and the language that flows through her. "I have always felt easier spinning my answers out of my own bowels" (138), says Magda of her choice to speak with her own voice, of finding answers within her own body.[12] As she will finally acknowledge at the end, "The medium. The median—that is what I wanted to be! Neither master nor slave, neither parent nor child, but the bridge between, so that in me the contraries should

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be reconciled!" (132) The merging of Magda and country is strengthened by allusions to the violation of the country by its colonizers. The country, too, like Magda, is a "jagged virgin," and Magda devises an act of self-exposure that collapses rape and colonization: "[D]escending to ideographs," she uses the stones to sketch "a woman lying on her back, her figure fuller than mine, her legs parted" (134), thus portraying herself as a violated body stranded in the middle of a violated country as she is stranded in the middle of a postmodernist text from which "the relations of human subjects engaged in meaningful historical action" (Waugh 20) have all but disappeared.

Attwell may be right in asserting that Magda's "communion with the sky-gods is a substitute for....human communication and an attempt to find a language not mediated by social division" (67). However, Attwell does not address the specificity of such language, its pastiche-like quality, its foreignness, its gradual creation of a female subject who comes to defy paternal authority. Even while struggling against aphasia, Magda aligns herself with Freud's hysterics, who often suffered from aphasia or disruption of speech, as Freud's study of the case of Bertha Pappenheim, alias Anna O., indicates; but in doing so she exposes what psychoanalysis has chosen to overlook—the way in which the hysterics' language challenges the father's law.[13] Bertha Pappenheim's choice of a plural language revealed her as the protagonist of a revised family romance: she dethroned her father, but rather than replacing him with a more illustrious one, she left his place empty. The disruption of speech in Magda's narrative is, as in Bertha's linguistic pastiche, a consequence of the fall of the father.[14] Magda's stone messages begin as a plea to men whom she envisions as her saviors. She addresses these men first as a character in a fiction, "CINDRLA ES MI," and writes the messages in broken language, thus furthering the act of political decolonization already implicit in the narrative disjunctions that challenge traditional realism. At the beginning her words only express her powerlessness; but eventually they grow into "more alluring" messages, which make forays beyond the boundaries of the story that she is destined to inhabit. Starting as the utterance of an unspecified male subject "VENE AL TERRA," "QUIERO UN AUTR," "SON ISOLADO" (132), they eventually become "POEMAS CREPUSCLRS," "SOMNOS DE LIBERTAD," "AMOR SIN TERROR," "DII SIN FUROR," "NOTTI DI AMITAD." And finally they form a poem in which Magda assumes the position of subject, not only by switching to feminine endings, but also by virtue of a recalling of the motifs of her own plight that have been reiterated throughout the novel—loneliness, desire, the master-slave dynamics, the "structural inadequacies of a daughter's estate"[15]: "DESERTA MI OFRA-ELECTAS ELEMENTARIAS-DOMINE O SCLAVA-FEMM O FILIA-MA SEMPRE HA DESIDER-LA MEDIA ENTRE" (133).[16] On one level Magda's stones are the tombstones of a world that has turned itself into a graveyard. They expose the impulse behind colonization, which makes "the land a page on which the generations write their story" (Coetzee, *White Writing* 66). However, the story Magda's disrupted language writes is not a story of victory, the story of those

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who make history, but rather a manifestation of the displacement of the father, a perhaps doomed but nevertheless necessary step toward finding a language in which "bodies are their own signs" (*Foe* 157). Like Anna O., by constructing her speech as a pastiche from several languages, Magda goes beyond the perimeter of any given linguistic system and challenges the patrilinear law which governs its construction. She refuses its closure and, most importantly, since language guarantees the assumption of sexual identity, by passing from one language to another, she exposes the arbitrary character of that identity.

Magda is reluctant to utter her own name, as though she perceived it as the sign of a unity to which she has no claim.[17] All that she can claim for herself is the locus of utterance, the "heart of the country," the place from which she speaks, the place that defines her position, the closest approximation to an ontological status. She sees herself as "a being with a hole inside me, I signify something, I do not know what" (9). But by the end of the novel she has found a way to make it signify. Magda, "a factor, [who deals] in signs merely" (27), is a body traversed by language, "a torrent of sound streaming into the universe" (10); however, this language is no longer "the eternal NO" of the father, but is made up of "thousands of corpuscles weeping, groaning, gnashing their teeth" (10). Thus, this novel, while asserting the slippery quality of language and the death of the subject, ultimately gives body to language and makes it palpable, conflating language, body and country (the position from which Magda speaks) in the creation of stone messages.

By accepting the provisionality and positionality of identity, Magda can escape the trap of daughterhood and offer a reconciliation of opposites and, thus, paradoxically can desire escape from textuality and "a life unmediated by words." The daughter who has envisioned herself as the heroine of romance reaches at the end the verge of aphasia, and it is with the stones of this arid country that she will finally construct her messages, in a pastiche of foreign languages, to the Spaniards that she imagines cruising the sky in their flying machines. In building her stone messages Magda attempts, as it were, the reconstruction of subjectivity, the "mediation of a subject constructed historically through relations with other subjects" (Waugh 20). This allows her to become a literary precedent of Susan Barton, the heroine of *Foe*, Coetzee's later novel. Anticipating the opening of Susan's narrative, she announces:

> But tonight I have beaten the waters too long, I am weak, I am tired of telling myself things, tonight I am going to relax, give up, explore the pleasures of drowning, the feel of my body sliding out of me and another body sliding in, limbs inside my limbs, mouth inside my mouth. I welcome death as a version of life in which I will not be myself. There is a fallacy which I ought to see but will not. For when I wake on the ocean floor it will be the same old voice that drones out of me, drones or bubbles or whatever it is that words do in water. (53-4)

Thus it is not surprising that the first words Susan will tell Friday are an English translation of Magda's broken Spanish: "I am cast away. I am all

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alone" (*Foe* 5). In her longing to become "the medium," Magda invokes the death of the subject as culturally contructed by the language of the father and anticipates Susan Barton's exit at the end of *Foe*. Susan does in fact exit her body, leaving behind "Susan Barton and her captain, fat as pigs in their white nightclothes," leaving behind for everybody to see the female subject that, if we are to consider *Foe* as the fictional genesis of *Robinson Crusoe*, has been erased from the narrative.

Coetzee once observed that "silence about the place of black labour... represents a failure of imagination" (*White Writing* 71). It is not the purpose of *In the Heart of the Country* to overcome this failure, since the story of the black subject is only tangential to the main narrative; and in this respect the novel resembles another re-vision, Jean Rhys's *The Wide Sargasso Sea*, where, since what we have is a re-writing "in the interest of the white creole rather than the native" (Spivak, "Three Texts" 253), black Christophine simply disappears. But whereas Rhys's "revisionist" project ended with *The Wide Sargasso Sea*, Coetzee's "criticism-as-fiction, or fiction-as-criticism" insists on its own intertextual nature. If Coetzee's work posits itself as a project that traces a history "of the forms of discourse which have provided the legitimising of representation of various phases of imperialism" (Dovey 11), it is not surprising that *Foe* should begin where *In the Heart of the Country* leaves off. In *Foe*, far from disappearing, the native, Friday, is not only Susan's first interlocutor, the one who allows her to turn her life into a story, but is also the middle that is repressed in Magda's story, the very center that makes the novel possible. Peter Strauss has observed that "[i]t must have been difficult for Coetzee to find an ending for *In the Heart of the Country*. Magda says at one point: 'I want my story to have a beginning, a middle, and an end' (43) and the novel enacts her failure" (121). I would argue that this is not a failure, for Coetzee has learnt from Freud: to the very end, *In the Heart of the Country* emphasizes its status as a fragment, thus recalling that most elusive of hysterics' stories, the "Fragment of an Analysis," the story that reveals Dora as the woman who "refused to be a character in the story that Freud was composing for her" (Marcus 88) and that most effectively destablilizes Freud's role by exposing his own desire for an ending. Coetzee did not even attempt to find an ending for Magda's story: her story continues in *Life and Times of Michael K*, where Michael K's ambition is to be as resistant as stone, and in *Foe*.

NOTES

[1]I would like to thank Greg Smith, Kofi Owusu, and the readers of *Research in African Literatures* for their careful reading of this essay and for their helpful suggestions.

[2]Stephen Watson, for instance, has argued that "*In the Heart of the Country* is, on one level, concerned to demonstrate that realism is not real at all, but simply a production of language, a code that people have come to accept as 'natural'" (373). Helen Tiffin has seen Coetzee's deliberate eschewing of realism as a way of emphasizing "the complicity of Western narrative and history" (32). Teresa Dovey has

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noticed that in his "criticism-as-fiction, or fiction-as-criticism," Coetzee "deliberately adopts and adapts the models and theories that lie to hand, inhabiting them in a way that closely approximates the Derridean strategy of deconstruction" (10).

[3]Among the early critics of this novel, Derek Wright and, as I noted earlier, Stephen Watson are two exceptions: rather than dismissing the disjunctions in Magda's narrative, they see them as the continuation of "the literary deconstruction of traditional realism," "a political act of decolonization" (Wright 114) that Coetzee had already attempted in *Dusklands*. However, by privileging Magda's "political stance," both Wright and Watson ignore the dynamics of the father-daughter paradigm and its implications at the level of the narrative structure of the novel. Failure to pay attention to the inscription of gender and, more specifically, to Magda's status as daughter, shapes also Helen Tiffin's reading of the novel, which emphasizes the similarities between Magda's actions and her father's and overlooks their differences and, consequently, the place of sexual difference in the problematics of interpretation. Tiffin claims that Magda's difficulty in getting rid of her father demonstrates that "the codes of the father have inevitably ensnared the daughter—she cannot escape perpetuating them" (28) and avoids any explanation of the ending of the novel. I don't want so much to underestimate the importance of Coetzee's political investment as to emphasize that his indictment of colonialism is diminished by erasing the role gender plays in it. Dovey has devoted a lengthy analysis to *In the Heart of the Country*, examining its relationship to the South African pastoral drama, but her Lacanian reading of Coetzee's text also ignores the issue of gender and the role that the incest paradigm plays in the novel. Although her reading is psychoanalytic, it doesn't focus on the relationship of Magda's narrative to the scenario of hysteria. Although Attwell has noticed that "Coetzee is more concerned...with narrative and its relation to other discourses than he is with representations per se" (13), the discourse of hysteria is conspicuously absent from his analysis, which focuses specifically with the relationship between Coetzee's novel and the *nouveau roman*, Wallace Stevens, Martin Buber, Sartre, Emile Benveniste, Roman Jakobson, and "the tradition of liberal realism and pastoral in white South African fiction since Olive Schreiner (58-59). Attwell notices the Oedipal implications of the father/daughter relationship, but chooses to read the family situation in anthropological terms, thus looking away from the scenario of hysteria to focus on Magda's transgressive effort to reveal "the structures of relationship and authority—with their accompanying pathologies—of the settler-colonial context" (60).

[4]Freud was not thoroughly original in his view of marriage as cure. In his treatise on mental alienation, Philippe Pinel, a doctor who practiced in France at the beginning of the nineteenth century, had already asserted with some conviction that "marriage constitutes for women a kind of preservative against the two sorts of insanity [idiocy and dementia] which are most inveterate and most often incurable" (*Traité médico-philosophique sur l'aliénation mentale* [Paris, 1801], cited in Foucault 149).

[5]Magda could indeed be one of the women that Elly Bulkin describes—those women "who, told to choose between or among identities, insist on selecting all" (cited in De Lauretis 9).

[6]As Patricia Waugh has remarked, "[D]espite the fact that post-modernism is usually presented as an art of the marginal and the oppositional and as such would

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seem at last to offer women the possibility of identity and inclusion" (3), "the postmodern construction of subjectivity is as problematic for women as the liberal construction of self" (16).

[7]"If the very structure of patrilineage guarantees that a man's son will inexorably take his place and his name, it also promises that a daughter will never be such a usurper, since she is an instrument of culture rather than an agent" (Gilbert, "Life's Empty Pack" 262).

[8]See Kahane, "Why Dora Now?" 31.

[9]Magda's insistence on her body as repulsive and disgusting seems to agree with Monique David-Ménard's discussion of the hysteric's conflation of sexual difference with uncleanliness (89-94).

[10]A process that Shari Benstock describes as a "simultaneous sealing and splitting that can only trace fissures and discontinuity" (29).

[11]According to Hena Maes-Jelinek, for instance, "her long monologue is an allegory of the South African situation; what she calls her own 'spinster fate' (p. 4) can be read as a reference to the isolation of South Africa" (90).

[12]The relationship between language and body becomes clearer once we take into account the intertextual nature of Coetzee's writing and think of Michael K, whose ambition is to be as resistant as stone.

[13]Bertha Pappenheim, when her power of speech did not desert her altogether, renounced German, her native language, the language of her fathers, and spoke a language that was "a mixture of all sorts of languages. At times when she was at her very best and most free, she talked French and Italian" (25). Even when she wrote, she did so "in a peculiar fashion": "She wrote with her left hand, and she used Roman printed letters," an alphabet that she did not know and she had to copy from her edition of Shakespeare. German ceased to make sense to her and, thus, stressed her "foreignness," her situation of exile in her father's land. As exile, she became immune to its laws and rejected its parental hold. Diane Hunter makes a similar point when she argues that "speaking coherent German meant integration into a cultural identity Bertah Pappenheim wanted to reject" (92). While I agree with Hunter that "in patriarchal soxialization, the power to formulate sentences coincides developmentally with a recognition of the power of the father" (100). I don't share her Kristevean view according to which this phenomenon signals a regression "from the Symbolic order of articulate German to the semiotic level of the body and the unintelligbility of foreign tongues...an attempt to recreate the special semiotic babble that exists between the infant and its mother" (100). Rather than a return to the semiotic babble, Bertha Pappenheim's disrupted speech is an attempt to go *beyond* the father-tongue.

[14]See Jacques Lacan's discussion of the intersections between social and linguistic structures in "The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis."

[15]I am borrowing this phrase from Gilbert 263.

[16]For a different reading of the stone messages, see Dovey 174.

[17]See Ernst Cassirer: "the unity and uniqueness of the name is not only a mark of the unity and uniqueness of the person, but actually constitutes it; the name is what first makes man an individual" (51).

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